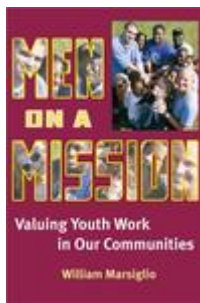


## A Good Man Is Hard to Find

A review of



**Men on a Mission: Valuing Youth Work in Our Communities**

by William Marsiglio

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Reviewed by

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Those of us who work in the field with children—especially boys with behavior problems—from families with a single female parent often spend time looking for a father figure to connect with the children. Even among very young children, evidence for the importance of the male caretaker is growing (Leibman & Abell, 2000). In the good old days, family workers could pair the child up with a male teacher, a coach, a religious leader, a scoutmaster, or any number of middle-class men willing to volunteer for the job. For many an orphan Annie there was a Daddy Warbucks. Marsiglio himself reminisces in *Men on a Mission: Valuing Youth Work in Our Communities* of the times when he could make a connection with youths just by entering a ball game with them on some field.

However, in the frightening world of today, every man who is a stranger—as well as and many who are not strangers—is a potential molester. Therefore, just as defensive medicine and defensive psychotherapy have developed to prevent lawsuits and false criminal

accusations, it seems that accusations of child molesting have given rise to defensive mentoring. Marsiglio documents the new barriers that society has built up, on the one hand, to protect children from would-be foul play but, on the other, preventing intimate, meaningful communication with an older male. Although fathers are not completely off the hook, the home context can often offer this intimate relationship; but woe to today's child without a father or with a distant one. Today's male figure has both legal advice and the door open more than a crack. Sometimes the opening isn't even enough; many organizations forbid adults being alone with children altogether.

The vilification of men in the helping professions, or, more precisely, in positions working with children is a misperception of the platform in some feminist movements. Most of these have no intention to target men in general as miscreants, but, in the process of breaking the yoke of male domination in society, some feminists inadvertently have allowed the popularization of male-bashing, even though most feminist activists view men as potential partners in life and in the liberation process. The result has caused men who are serious and sensitive as helpers of children to be overcautious, and the result has been some damage to the potential men have for growth-facilitating intimacy with children, both male and female.

An example of this tragedy is how men relate to the power of touching children. Marsiglio gives several powerful examples of how a handshake, a pat on the arm or shoulder, and, more daringly, a hug can significantly communicate that one cares. Most men who do not hug, or at least touch, refrain out of fear. I cannot but compare how in my country the badge of a successful worker in a group home or club is five kids hanging from the his or her arms, legs, back, or neck.

This book caused me to realize how lucky I am, spending my adult life outside the United States and allowed to hug an adolescent boy in a closed room. Indeed, it took me a while into the book to make some peace with the regulated behavior demanded of the American male youth worker. Are other cultures hiding ongoing child abuse? Is there less abuse where contact with youth and children is more regulated? I have not seen research on this subject, and there seems to be an implicit assumption in the book that regulation, a necessary evil, exists to protect the worker at least as much as the child. It brings to mind the Jewish legend that the first Temple was destroyed because of idol worship, whereas the second Temple was destroyed, although the people were righteous, because they took their neighbors to court too often.

In the name of proper disclosure, I am biased in favor of this book. Most of it takes place in Gainesville, Florida, where I grew up. Some of the cast of characters who are my own age may have played with me as children. Although the scoutmaster and the head of the boys' club (at that time it was only for boys) are gone, the troop house of the Presbyterian Church and the (now) boys' and girls' club are still there, where I spent happy days in tag football and Little League baseball, and evenings at troop meetings. The picture on the cover of the book, with Black and White adults and children together, shows how far we have

come from the time when we were forbidden to sell Pancake Day tickets to people on the other side of the tracks.

This book is a moving drama of men telling their stories of how children bring meaning into their lives—by bringing meaning into the lives of children. It is incredible how varied the backgrounds of these men are: all types of marital status, with or without children, rich or poor, straight or gay; there is no single demographic variable that seems to characterize them. Their motives differ as much as their backgrounds; they spend time with children to give back what they received, to expand the horizons of youth, to offer reciprocity and just “feeling good,” to witness the impact of what they do, and to experience what Marsiglio calls *generativity*, which is a kind of immortality whereby one passes on the essence of oneself to the generations to come. Having lived in the same community most of my adult life, I, too, can see the impact of my earlier work when an adult comes up to me and tells me he remembers how I “played” (meaning testing or psychotherapy) with him when he was a child.

The insights that may be gained from this book on the nature of altruism are important—but more as almost-raw data, since the presentation is more descriptive than explanatory. If the reader is willing to make the effort, he or she will find the contents more than worthwhile. The results seem to fly in the face of stereotypes of altruistic behavior as characteristic of members of the middle and upper classes, who have fewer worries making a living and can help another to enrich their lives. Marsiglio's interviewees come from all walks of life; particularly moving are the stories of people who grew up in poverty areas and somehow made it to the shore of responsible living. The stories of these people are imbued with a deep sense of purpose. These stories strongly support the thesis of Ignacio Martin-Baro (1994) concerning the altruistic nature of oppressed populations, and enlighten T. Landsman's concept of the *beautiful and noble person* (Landsman & Landsman, 1991), who gives lovingly to others.

Marsiglio characterizes himself as a gender scholar. Of course, research on men comprises studies as much as does research on women, but still it seems to me that the descriptive approach of the book leaves (or allows) the reader to draw his or her own conclusions concerning the gendering of youth work. There is some discussion of the boy code and of stereotyping men working with very young children in day care; as I write these lines, I am beginning to think that there may be a parallel between restrictions on men changing diapers of very young girls and those on women practicing medicine when they were just being allowed to do so.

On the basis of Marsiglio's methodology and subject matter, I was sure that he was a sociologist, but in the book he mentions his background is psychology. Thankfully his methodology is becoming more and more accepted in the psychological literature as qualitative research becomes closer to the mainstream in psychology. He lets the men tell their own stories about how they experience being with (mostly troubled) children and

invests his scientific talents in organizing the narratives into themes and connecting them with each other.

His theoretical approach, which organizes the book, is based on his former research on fathers and stepfathers. Much of his theory is clearly the social part of social psychology; Marsiglio touches upon rituals and norms, discussing the *how* (how the men express bonds, how they create challenges with kids, how they express their feelings, how they set limits) rather than *why* human beings do this.

It is interesting that the chapter on personal growth—accounting for how children have caused these men to significantly change their perception and values—is the shortest substantive chapter in the book (the last chapter is really the shortest, but it is a summary). In my opinion, the issue of growth is central in understanding the altruistic relationship, and capitalizing on the opportunity of working through one's own issues is both a motive and a byproduct of working with troubled youth. Returning to the Daddy Warbucks metaphor, it seems that before adopting Annie, Oliver Warbucks as a child had lost his father and then his mother, becoming an orphan himself. The shadowy side of him was making his money from ammunition sales, and the relation with Annie apparently allowed him to show a more human side. Did that relationship change his life? A sensitive reading (isn't that the way we always read comic strips?) suggests that it probably did.

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